

## The View from the Bus

# How the Press Serves U.S. Voters

By JIM DICKENSON



CHARLIE NEIBERGALL © AP/WIDEWORLD

A veteran political journalist shares the inside story of life on the road during a U.S. presidential campaign and discusses the reporter's role in conveying a candidate's message to the American people.



JIM BOURG/REUTERS

The last act of a long campaign day is distribution of the next day's equally long schedule, the "bible," as it's known, to all hands—press, staff, advisers—either given to us as we're getting off the plane or slipped under our hotel room doors. A typical day begins something like this:

- 6:15 a.m. Bags in the lobby.
- 7:15 a.m. Candidate and press pool depart hotel for station KXYZ-TV.
- 7:30 a.m. Staff and press corps board bus for the Palm Restaurant for 8 a.m. breakfast with Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club.
- 7:45 a.m. Five-minute candidate interview with KXYZ morning anchor Joe Smith.
- 7:50 a.m. Depart KXYZ for the Palm.
- 9:00 a.m. Depart the Palm for Avery Houston airport.

And so it goes—a lot of events and moving parts for the day. At least the Chamber/Rotary meeting means we don't have to worry about whether there's time to grab breakfast in the hotel coffee shop.

(One iron rule on the campaign: Eat at every opportunity, because the schedule can cause you to miss a meal.) And the press pool for KXYZ will give us a written "fill," or report, of what was said and done there. The pool is for events where time, space and other considerations won't accommodate the full press corps. It generally includes a daily newspaper reporter, TV reporter, news magazine reporter, and wire service (Associated Press or Reuters) reporter, and we all are assigned our turns in the pools.

The "bible" is a meticulously detailed document compiled by the campaign staff that enables everyone to plan their day; each reporter has different priorities and projects to work on. What looks like the main event, the likely source of the news lead for the day? Is "filing time" to write and transmit stories built into the schedule, and at the right points? Most of us have different deadlines due to geography and our organization's individual production schedules. Is there an event I can skip so I can grab the candidate's staffers with whom I need to talk for a news analysis I'm working on?

An American presidential campaign is a complex, intricate dance involving many people. For everyone involved, it also is a long, grueling process, more exhausting for some than for others. A candidate who is running third or fourth or fifth in the primaries, for instance, will try to cram more events into the day, particularly in the small but crucial states of Iowa (first caucus in the nation) and New Hampshire (first primary), where face-to-face contact with the voters is not only essential but expected.

Long before I get on the campaign plane, I have researched the members of the campaign staff. Who are the paid consultants, media experts and pollsters? Who are the unpaid and unofficial advisers who, as respected former officeholders, activists, or policy "wonks" (specialists), are highly influential?

I also must internalize the campaign strategy. How much effort needed to go into the traditional early primary states, Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina? How were campaigns planning to deal with the new February 5, 2008 "super primary" held simultaneously in so many states—including such blockbuster states as New York

*Republican presidential hopeful Senator John McCain, with his wife, Cindy, speaks at a news conference in Des Moines, Iowa, in front of his campaign bus.*

and California—that it could determine a party's presidential nominee that day, nine months in advance of Election Day? In which states is the candidate strong and in which ones weak? In which areas of each state are the different candidates strong and weak? All these details are building blocks in the most important political decision the American people make—their choice of president.

We in the press corps are a major factor in this electoral process. Because of the decline of the political parties, concurrent with the primaries' rise in importance, the media have become the early screeners of the candidates. Our function is to evaluate their policies; their personal characteristics, such as intelligence, temperament, honesty, judgment, organizational ability and persuasiveness; and their fitness for the presidency, to help the voters make informed decisions in this vital matter. We have taken this role very seriously

ever since publication of *The Making of the President 1960*, Theodore White's famed, best-selling book about John F. Kennedy's victorious presidential campaign against Richard Nixon.

Cultivating staff and consultants who can be good information sources is a top priority for political reporters. This is an ongoing exercise in character evaluation, courtship and diplomacy. The key is to identify sources who truly know what's going on in the campaign and who will share it with you, a rare combination both on the campaign and in the Oval Office. Outside professional consultants are often better for this purpose than long-time, personal loyalists because they know that they'll likely be back on a future campaign, as will I, and we need each other.

I also evaluate the unpaid advisers who have a national political interest rather than a career or personal investment in the campaign. On one Democratic presidential campaign, I befriended a genial political activist and veteran of the Kennedy presidential races. We had dinner on the road a couple of times and shared a drink at the bar other times. At a certain point,

he decided he couldn't abide the campaign's mistakes and miscalculations any longer. Believing that he could trust me to get the story right and protect his identity, he gave me a great running inside view of the campaign on "background," which meant that I could use the information but couldn't quote him by name or identify him. The result was some of the best campaign analysis I've ever written.

In 1988, I was with *The Washington Post* and covered then-Senator Al Gore in the so-called Super Tuesday primary election in which several southern states held their primaries on the same day in an effort to increase the region's influence on the presidential nomination. (He did well there, but didn't have the resources for the subsequent primaries in northern states.) Gore made a stop in his home state of Tennessee at a hospital that had a new, state-of-the-art children's wing. We were met there by then-Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, and I decided to miss the hospital tour in order to interview Clinton. I had learned in previous conversations that he was an excellent and accessible political analyst, and the



Left: The press records Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Hillary Clinton campaigning at a restaurant in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Below: Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama talks with reporters during a campaign flight.



With the newer technology of laptop computers, Blackberries, cell phones, and the like, we are increasingly able to anticipate developments even when out on the road. We can monitor the wire services and other news organizations' Web sites. We don't have to chase campaign staff and advisers for reactions to breaking events because they generally beat us to it with an e-mail. Filing stories from the road in time for deadlines could be difficult in the era prior to computers and modems, but communication with the news desk back home is now generally constant and instantaneous with cell phones, wireless Internet access, and high-speed, broadband-quality modems for transmitting and receiving stories, memos and background documents on our laptops. The new technology, including satellites, obviously also has eased the lives of television crews, for whom the logistics of getting film and tape back to their hometown headquarters in time for the evening newscast used to be a daily logistical nightmare.

New technology, however, means more work. Reporters for news organizations that have Web sites and radio stations are expected to file breaking stories for them throughout the day. And for technical reasons none of us ever understood, the first-edition deadlines at both major dailies where I worked, *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Post*, became an hour earlier, 7 p.m. rather than 8 p.m., after the newsrooms were computerized. It also means the desk can easily reach you with sometimes really dumb story ideas.

It's a great life if you don't weaken. It's a life for the young and strong who can work 16-hour days and defer dinner until 11 p.m. When I was young and macho (up to about age 50), I considered it an invigorating challenge.

One of the most frequent remarks I heard from people when they learned that I was in the news business was, "That sounds interesting. You must learn something new every day." "Yes," I would respond, thinking to myself, "you have no idea."



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interview was time extremely well spent. I covered myself by agreeing with a colleague from a noncompetitive paper in the Midwest to fill him in on Clinton in return for his fill on the hospital tour.

The "bible" lays out what's planned, but it can't anticipate the thousand and one unforeseen events that invariably pop up. Always I must be ready to respond to the unexpected, which of course is the definition of the news business. New developments in Iraq. New action in Congress on immigration or health care. A candidate dropping out of his party's primary because of fundraising problems. And so forth.

Often these twists are welcome simply because both reporters and editors become weary of the candidate's standard "stump," or campaign, speech. It is

repeated at event after event to appreciative new audiences but drives us reporters to look constantly for a fresh news lead or for feature and analysis stories. In one campaign, however, I had composed and filed what I thought was a marvelous story in which the day's major campaign events wonderfully illustrated the candidate's position on his three major issues. I was very proud of the story and filed it well before deadline. At the next event, however, my candidate pointed out that his opponent had opened his current campaign tour with a questionable assertion that carbon dioxide emitted by tree leaves was the cause of haze and smog in an eastern U.S. mountain range, thus igniting a critical discussion of his environmental policies. We spent the next couple of days scrambling to report that, and my painstaking literary effort from days earlier was obliterated by what I thought was a nonsensical issue.

#### For more information:

Role of the Press

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-236528/history-of-publishing>